

Photography Can Become A Weapon Of Repression

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Offering Silence To The Oppressed Or How Photography Can Become A Weapon Of Repression

By Derek Powazek

(source:The Spinning Head Blog)

An exhibition called 'Beware The Cost Of War' recently opened in London.

Reading about it in the New York Times 'Lens' blog left me deeply disappointed and concerned.

Let me explain.

(Aside: Yoav Galai, the curator, is someone I have called a friend for some time now and I hope that he will forgive me for this very critical review of what is something he clearly put a lot of work in to. It is not personal, but merely a reflection on this propensity in our world to fear speaking, to raise a voice, to add details and specifics where generalizations only confuse, perpetuate injustices and acquit the guilty. I am sorry Yoav. I must say my piece.)

In their book *Another Way of Telling* photographer Jean Mohr and writer/intellectual John Berger present an experiment where a series of Mohr's photographs, each with their captions removed, are shown to a number of ordinary strangers and each is asked to explain what they see in the photograph. As Jean Mohr himself explains:

Was it a game, a test, an experiment? All three, and something else too; a photographer's quest, the desire to know how the images he makes are seen, read, interpreted, perhaps rejected by others. In fact in face of any photo the spectator projects something of her or himself. The image is like a springboard. (page 42)

The result was that each individual described the photograph differently, thereby rending each photograph meaningless, and completely erasing it of history, context, intent and meaning and replacing them with what were little more than randomly created ideas based on fantasies, prejudices, and ignorances. The photos gave nothing to the viewer, the viewer merely imposed their 'knowledge' – factual and otherwise, onto the image. The images became springboards indeed, but they also became empty vessels into which the viewer could put anything and make them what s/he wanted. The images offered nothing, taught nothing, revealed nothing and as a result added nothing.

Jean Mohr also collaborated with the writer/intellectual Edward Said to produce what I consider to be one of the finest, most important, book of photojournalism ever – *After The Last Sky*. This book, about which I have written elsewhere, is a masterful collaboration between a photographer and a writer. It is one of those rare photography books that has managed to lift itself from the fashionable but frivolous shelves of photography books and into the more relevant Middle East History section of a bookstore.

The book grew out of an unusual context; in 1983 Edward Said was a consultant to the United Nations International Conference on the Question of Palestine (ICQP) and he suggested that some of Jean Mohr's photographs of Palestinians be hung in the entrance hall to the main conference site in Geneva, Switzerland. The official response to this suggestion, as Said himself describes it in the book, was unusual; they would allow the photographs to be hung, but no words could accompany them, and no explanations.

It was then that Said and Mohr came up with the idea of writing about the Palestinians – about adding the words to the photographs. As Said explains:

Let us use photographs and text, we said to each other, to say something that hasn't been said about Palestinians. (page 4)

But they were aware that the problems they faced was not a lack of text on this matter, but perhaps too much of it. But it was also clear that:

...for all the writing about them, Palestinians remain virtually unknown. Especially in the West, particularly in the United States, Palestinians are not so much a people as a pretext for a call to arms. (page 5)

Confronting this challenge about how to convey the Palestinian experience to a reluctant audience was not going to be easy, and yet it was crucial and clear that text was going to be a fundamental act of resistance, and that its place for a people oppressed was fundamentally important because:

Stateless, dispossessed, de-centered, we [Palestinians] are frequently unable either to speak the 'truth' of our experience or to make it heard. We do not usually control the images that represent us; we have been confined to spaces designed to reduce or stunt us; and we have often been distorted by pressures and powers that have been too much for us. (page 6)

'Beware The Cost Of War' is an exhibition of Israeli and Palestinian photographs now being shown in London. In a review written on the New York Times blog 'Lens', a review titled *Stirring Images, No Names* the writers explain that:

'Beware the Cost of War,' a show opening Friday at the Blackall Studios in London, will be conspicuous for many reasons — one of them being what it lacks: captions and credits next to the images, which were taken both by Israeli and Palestinian photographers.

The notion is that, without words, the pictures will be freer to speak for themselves.

In a slide show of some of the images we are shown scenes of grieving Palestinian and Lebanese families and of Israeli families. The curator, Yoav Galai, we are told:

...hoped viewers would discard customary ideological and political preconceptions as they looked at the images, many of which are deeply disturbing...

He is later quoted as saying:

'I realized it's hard to show what's really happening,' Mr. Galai said. 'Once a photograph is out there, people ascribe whatever they want to it. So I thought, why not take all the pictures and tear them away from their narrative?'

Yoav Galai is a young photographer. An Israeli who has documented the destruction of the Palestinian social, cultural and physical space in occupied East Jerusalem, he and I have frequently communicated via email and I respect his individual voice and determination.

But sadly I find myself in deep conflict and disagreement with this entire exhibition, and the silencing of the experience, history, and narrative of the Palestinian people already suffering from decades of silencing, marginalization, and erasure. The entire impression of 'balance' here is specious, and frankly misrepresents the situation which is simply one of a powerful military occupier systematically repressing and controlling an otherwise unarmed and desperate Palestinian population.

Tearing away the narrative, the history, the context of a photograph is the best way to further enable people to ascribe whatever meaning people want to images, and hence, only confirm and not question their prejudices, hates, ignorances and fears.

That Israeli historians, intellectuals, writers and journalists can clearly speak of this, admitting to the injustices their government has been executing against the Palestinians, only reminds us of the vast gap in intellectual and physical courage that imbues our societies when it comes to the question of the rights of an Arab people.

This exhibition in its current format ends up committing a number of sins against the history of the situation it claims to speak about, and even about the lives of the people involved.

The exhibition removes context, so that we never know who is the occupier, and who the occupied. It pretends to suggest that everyone is a victim, when in fact that is not true. Israel is an occupying force, its citizens repeatedly voting into power civilians leaders, most all with deep military track records and connections, based on their ability to 'handle the Palestinians'. The Palestinians are an unarmed people now trapped in quite possibly the most extensive, professionally administered, rationally planned, efficiently executed occupation regime in history.

The exhibition removes chronology, so that we never know whether the act occurred this year e.g. the brutal and unnecessary massacre of nearly 2000 Palestinians of Gaza in early 2009 prompted by Israeli domestic political needs and condemned in the recent UN Goldstone Report vs. the aftermath of a suicide bomb that occurred many years ago and the likes of which have not been repeated in years.

The exhibition removes history, so that we never know what it is that violence represents i.e. acts of legitimate violence in order to resist and overthrow and illegal occupation vs. acts of repressive violence meant to occupy, steal, and control.

The exhibition removes the ugliest of constant and material facts; the dehumanizing and degrading check points, the summary arrests, the illegal (and yes, please, they are illegal) settlements, the military patrols that enable them, the hideous barbarism of the fundamentalist, fanatical and humanly deviant Jewish settlers, the summary executions, the

entire infrastructure — administrative, military, political, under-cover of the occupation regime, the displacements, the senseless closures, and the constant threat of violence that hangs in the air and frequently manifests itself into reality.

The exhibition in fact become a tool of oppression, creating ‘balance’ where there is none, offering the easy consumption of ‘violence’ while ensuring that nothing provokes us to realize the truths that create the violence, the injustices that continue to be perpetrated, and the powers that have to held accountable for what is a clear and simple crime against humanity and massive violation of international law.

As writer Peter Lagerquist comments after hearing and reading about this exhibit:

It’s not only offensive but brutalizing, because it perpetrates another violence on those pictures, and their subjects. They are robbed of meaning, the viewer is robbed of their ability to think critically about violence, rather than merely wringing their hands over it. All that we are left with here is diffuse pathos, the knowledge that violence is bad. And this simply is not enough; we need to understand something else.

We don’t have to love the Palestinians, but why must we insist on shutting them up? Why must we be so dismissive of values and laws that we with such fanfare created and offered at Nuremburg and enshrined in so many UN charters and Geneva Conventions? Why, when it comes to the ‘lesser’ people, do our voices suddenly find no air, our minds no thoughts, our courage no will and our photographs no captions?

An oppressor wants to erase the voice of the oppressed. ‘Balance’ serves the interests of those exercising disproportionate violence and control over a weaker people and society. A people displaced, dispossessed, ignored, dehumanized, and incarcerated, in flagrant violation of our most valued principles of international law, justice and rights, do not need us to ‘remove’ their context, history and experiences of their suffering. On the contrary, it is precisely words, text, and voice that need to be used to unveil their experience. It is crucial to our responsibilities as reporters, journalists and photojournalists, to speak with courage and clarity and add our voice to those of the weak to counter, and challenge the easily heard and broader disseminated voice of the powerful.

Michael Massing took on the issue of specious ‘balance’ that today’s media organizations strive for and identified it as one of the major problems with journalism today. In a piece called *The Press; The Enemy Within* he quoted the writer Ken Silverstein (I am a big fan of Ken’s work!) who was then working on a piece about voting fraud in St. Louis and who found clear evidence of Republic Party manipulation of votes but was not allowed to say it as such and encouraged to ‘balance’ it with comments about similar actions, though far less systematic, by the Democrats:

I am completely exasperated by this approach to the news. The idea seems to be that we go out to report but when it comes time to write we turn our brains off and repeat the spin from both sides. God forbid we should attempt to fairly assess what we see with our own eyes. ‘Balanced’ is not fair, it’s just an easy way of avoiding real reporting and shirking our responsibility to inform readers.

Any easy was to shirk our responsibility to inform readers, and I would add, help them understand the perspectives and principles that are in fact consistently and necessarily defensible. And we are being cowards to not admit that there are principles of law, justice and national behavior and they are enshrined in documents that we love to quote e.g. Sudan, Kosovo, or Kuwait when it suits our needs.

I quote Edward Said from his work *Representations of the Intellectual* when he points out that:

Universality means taking risks in order to go beyond the easy certainties provided to us by our background, language, nationality, which so often shield us from the reality of others. It also means looking for and trying to uphold a single standard for human behavior when it comes to such matters as foreign and social policy. (page xiv)

My point would be that for the contemporary intellectual [or individual] living at a time that is already confused by the disappearance of what seem to have been objective moral norms and sensible authority, is it unacceptable simply either blindly to support the behavior of one’s own country and overlook its crimes or to say rather supinely ‘I believe they all do it, and that’s the way of the world?’ To speak consistently is upholding standards of international behavior and the support of human rights is not to look inwards for a guiding light supplied to one by inspiration or prophetic intuition. Most countries in the world are signatories to a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed in 1948, reaffirmed by every new member state of the UN. There are equally solemn conventions on the rules of war, on treatment of prisoners, on the rights of workers, women, children, immigrants and refugees. None of these documents says anything about ‘disqualified’ or less equal races or peoples. All are entitled to the same freedoms. (page 97)

This exhibition, sadly participated in by Palestinians photographers themselves, further oppresses the Palestinian experience, because it reduces everything to merely violence and sensationalism. This is the legacy of wire photography, and of mainstream photojournalism that chases blood, celebrates murder, and titillates through the tragic.

At a time when more than ever we need to speak with courage and clarity at the systematic dispossession of what little has been left to this blighted people, we have photojournalists and curators participating in a project of silence and obfuscation.

“Beware The Cost Of War” unfortunately attempts to balance what is so terribly imbalanced. And in that process it misleads. There is nothing to be gained by wringing our hands at the hideousness of blood and flesh torn by bombs. There is nothing to be understood by images of mothers crying. There is no value in the sight of another babies still body. To produce something that can really only provoke pity — a debilitating and cowardly emotion, is to produce nothing at all. (I am reminded of Nietzsche’s argument that — the thirst for pity is a thirst for self-enjoyment, and at the expense of one’s fellow men. It reveals man in the complete inconsideration of his most intimate dear self, but not precisely in his “stupidity”.)

As photographers we must demand that the text be returned to us who made the works. Our eye and our text is our intent, our ideas, our values and our risks. We must insist that our images not be exploited or left open to the random violence and fantasies of an indifferent and/or confused viewer. Context matters, history matters, and memory matters. We must insist that our words are not dismissed, that the intents with which we produced our images is not marginalized, and that our images do not become merely “illustrations” but are clear statements of our work and our beliefs.

Our words anchor the image, and give it something that itself does not contain; meaning and intent. The caption is crucial because it is also the photographer’s insistence on controlling the use the image is put to, and to what extent it can be manipulated. In a world overrun with meaningless illustrations, the caption takes on even greater value. Context becomes a powerful weapon against propaganda and obfuscation. And a means towards clarity and understanding. We should not surrender or relinquish this right easily. In a conflict mired in millions of words of propaganda, from both sides of course but certainly largely from the mouths of the powerful who have an unbalanced access to mainstream print, internet, and tv media, the words of those who have witnessed first hand are paramount.

Epilogue: A few days ago a Swedish magazine invited me to publish my portraiture from Gaza in its pages. A highly respected publication, it offered me the choice to submit as many images as I liked, with just one condition — they would not use the words that accompanied the work. They only wanted the pictures. You can see this work, images with words, as it appeared in a recent issue of The Virginia Quarterly Review. I refused to let them publish the work, arguing that erasing the words reduced them to meaningless aesthetics, and silenced the voices of the individuals who sacrificed their time and patience in the most horrifying of conditions so that I may carry to the world their sufferings. As photographers we either forget, or prevented from being complete individuals; thinking, creative individuals with opinions, ideas and realizations. We must defend this completeness, and the sanctity of our individual experiences, understandings and conclusions.

Note: This post was edited to ensure that it is understood that it does not claim that the curator(s) intended to oppress the voices or remove context, but simply that the current format inadvertently ends up doing that. This is a criticism of the format, not of the individuals involved, all of whom I am more than sure have the most determined and committed intentions to raise awareness of the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.